

'On vetos'

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In my last column, I talked about the Republican filibuster in the Senate as a large obstacle Democrats have faced in getting things done in Washington. Today, I'd like to air another favorite stall tactic: the presidential veto.

On first look, President Bush has been a model of accommodation, exercising his veto power only four times so far during in his 81 months in office. But of course, there's method to his madness: he was lucky enough to have a tame GOP Congress during those years, a Congress that shared his conservative values.

With the Democrats in charge, expect to see more vetoes. And expect them soon. Of his four vetoes, three have occurred since Democrats took over.

Let's take a quick look at the issues the president deemed evil enough to smack down: ending war, keeping children healthy and curing disease (that one was bad enough to veto twice).

Of course, the issues are a bit more complicated than that. The president balked at including a timetable for withdrawal in a war funding bill. He has decided that even though Congress and a majority of the public want this war to end, he's the decider. He can keep the war going as long as he sees fit. Or at least until he can offload it onto his successor.

Two vetoes that nixed funding for stem cell research were dropped on Congress, including Bush's first-ever veto when the bill was sent to his desk by a GOP-controlled Congress. These congressional efforts were supported by a wide range of medical and scientific groups as promising paths toward cures to a host of diseases, from diabetes and blindness to cancer and AIDS.

The veto on child health care, which occurred just two weeks ago, flew in the face of not only the public, but also the president's own party. To add a little context to the president's decision, the bipartisan plan to insure 10 million children would cost \$35 billion over five years, or \$7.5 billion annually. Compare that to the president's expected request for \$190 billion for one year of continued occupation of Iraq and you'll get a sense of my frustration.

As this column goes to press, the House of Representatives is scheduled to vote on a veto override for the SCHIP bill. It's yet to be seen if this push will be successful, but it's nice to see that so many Republicans are coming to their senses and recognizing the president's curious use of presidential power is off base.

Of course, Bush's lack of veto willpower doesn't stop at policy. It coasts comfortably into excessive spending measures. This small-government conservative presided over the creation of one of the largest bureaucracies ever, the Department of Homeland Defense. And it appears that he hasn't seen a spending bill he doesn't like.

As 2000 drew to a close, President Clinton announced the country was on course to eliminate public debt within a decade. That year, Clinton's final year in office, the government took in \$236 billion more than it spent.

Rather than Clinton's beefed-up economy to wipe out our debt, Bush has squandered it through war, tax cuts for the rich and pay-offs to big business. Instead of wiping out the debt, he has watched it grow to \$9 trillion.

In his waning days in office, one would think the president must finally be taking the debt seriously. Instead, he's still hoping his extravagant tax cuts to the rich will become permanent.

Truth be told, there are a few funding bills he's balked at. Unfortunately, the bills he opposes are those introduced this year by the Democratic majority, bills that attempt to repair some of the damage the president has wreaked during his tenure.

But because the president doesn't put as high a priority on domestic programs as Democrats,

he has threatened to veto them. I suppose he thinks it's just too bad that the president's budget would cut vital education, health, safety and veterans' health programs.

The veto is an important part of government. It makes sure that no one branch can dominate the other. But as with any great power, it must be wielded responsibly. I will continue to hope that the president uses this power sensibly, but I'll also be prepared to lead veto override fights when he fails to do so.